

ARTICLE APPEARED
PAGE 1-AWASHINGTON TIMES
12 June 1985

Spies spur U.S. battle-plan changes

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The practical details of espionage, the damage caused by the alleged sale of U.S. Navy secrets to the Soviets and a swap of spies underscored yesterday the clandestine side of East-West relations.

In quick succession, Justice Department sources revealed that accused spy John A. Walker Jr. repeatedly visited Mexico City, and Pentagon officials said secrets that he allegedly helped sell since the 1960s have apparently caused enough damage to Navy security that battle plans must be changed.

Meanwhile, the United States gave up yesterday a Pole, a Bulgarian, and two East Germans, one of them a grandmother, in exchange for 23 unidentified East German and Polish prisoners who were in Soviet bloc custody, a State Department official said.

In the Walker case, the one-time Navy warrant officer, now jailed without bond in Baltimore on espionage charges, apparently visited Mexico after spending time in the San Francisco area, Department of Justice sources revealed.

Mexico, according to U.S. counterintelligence experts, is used frequently by the Soviet KGB because it can run agents back and forth across the relatively open border

without much concern about detection. Mexico City is also a convenient place to receive material from spies, since U.S. counterintelligence capability is hindered there.

Neither U.S. Ambassador to Mexico John Gavin nor the Department of State's Mexico bureau would confirm the Mexican connection.

The secrets allegedly sold by John Walker, his brother, his son and a fourth person over a 20-year period apparently caused enough damage to Navy security that battle plans against Soviet ships must be entirely

changed, admitted Adm. James Watkins, chief of naval operations.

At a press conference in the Pentagon, Adm. Watkins said the secrets which the Walker ring are charged with selling to the Soviets are a "very serious" but not "catastrophic" blow to the operations of the Navy's undersea fleet.

Despite the admitted hemorrhage of classified information, Adm. Watkins asserted that U.S. Navy ships, planes and missile-launching subs still are safe from certain Soviet detection.

In West Berlin, the East-West prisoner swap took place on the Glienicke Bridge, which connects West Berlin with East Germany. A senior State Department official said secret negotiations for the exchange have apparently been going on for three years.

Administration sources in Washington said the Soviet Union had rejected a request to include Andrei Sakharov and Anatoly Shcharansky in the deal.

The 23 prisoners from the East Germany side were driven to the center of the bridge in a bus. They were handed over for the four who had been released earlier in the U.S. and flown to West Berlin.

A Western diplomat said it was the biggest exchange of spies and prisoners since the practice began in 1962, when U-2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers was exchanged for a Soviet spy named Rudolf Abel.

East German lawyer Wolfgang Vogel, who has been involved in many spy exchanges in the past, was recognized greeting the four prisoners flown from the United States before they disappeared behind border fortifications.

They included Dresden physicist Alfred Zehe, jailed this year for eight years, and fellow East German Alice Michelson, 68, who had been sentenced to 10 years.

The Pole was identified as Marian Zacharski, jailed for life in 1981, and the Bulgarian as Penyu Kostadinov, jailed recently for 10 years.

Of the four, officials said Zacharski, an undercover Polish intelligence officer, caused the most damage to U.S. security.

Officials said he got information about F-15 fighters, the B-1 and Stealth bombers and the Phoenix missile system from a defense industry engineer.

Adm. Watkins, addressing the problem of security breaches, made a particular effort to emphasize that the Navy has no indication that the Soviets are now able to detect U.S. missile-launching subs if they do not want to be detected.

"We remain convinced that the submarine force is still 100 percent survivable," he said.

"There is some indication in the past 10 years, because of this amazing ability on the part of the Soviet

Union at sea to demonstrate improvements in a variety of their systems, that [it] could have been influenced by information gleaned out of the Walker tragedy," Adm. Watkins said.

The Navy is considering expanding use of spot lie-detector tests for all personnel with classified clearance, he said, and Mr. Lehman urged Congress to authorize the death penalty for spying in peacetime.

As part of the Department of Defense reaction to the unprecedented scope of espionage, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger announced he had ordered all the services to reduce by 10 percent the number of employees who hold clearances to view classified documents.

The reduction will affect civilians working for defense contractors as well as the military services, he said. The reductions are to be made by Oct. 1.

There are currently 4.3 million industry officials and active-duty and civilian employees of the Defense Department holding some type of security clearance, according to the Defense Department.

Mr. Weinberger also said he had ordered the appointment of a special commission headed by retired Army Gen. Richard G. Stilwell "to identify . . . vulnerabilities or weaknesses" in Pentagon security procedures.

For the Navy's part, Mr. Lehman said, "We are moving out smartly to correct what we have identified as some very real deficiencies in our entire security system. The system for granting clearances has become swamped by this tremendous

growth in the bureaucracy over the last 20 years."

He expected eventually to cut by 50 percent the number of personnel with very sensitive security clearances. A deadline for the cut was not specified.

Adm. Watkins spoke of compromised data involving air warfare, anti-ship warfare, anti-sub warfare and the viability of the sea-leg of the United States' land, air and sea defensive triad because of the alleged spying activities.

"The loss is very serious, but it's one which we have now bounded," he

said. "This is a very large exposure to the Soviets over a long period of time, so it's going to take longer to recover from the damage."

"The most serious area of compromise" involves communications codes and technical communications information, Mr. Lehman said.

Be assured that the Navy is assuming "the worst case. We always assume our potential adversaries have the information, and we work accordingly," he said.

"New designs must now be accelerated and equipment produced more quickly than previously planned," he said. "Procedures to avoid the use of compromised [communications] equipment are under way."

"Very little, if any, of the technical design information that was lost relates to key weapons systems, sensors and platforms. The communications information is largely operational in nature and loses value with time," Adm. Watkins said.

Most of the information dealing with missile-launching submarines dates from "the '62 to '69 time frame," when Mr. Walker was assigned to two submarines and a shore installation that dealt with submarine communications, said Adm. Watkins.

Since then, he said, "tactics and equipment have changed markedly, with major advances in equipment."

However, information about the ability of the United States to find and destroy Soviet missile-launching subs may have been compromised, Adm. Watkins warned.

Walter Andrews contributed to this article, which also includes wire service reports.